Leon D. Stitskin

FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

MAIMONIDES' UNBENDING OPPOSITION TO ASTROLOGY

Maimonides' Letter to the Jews of Marseilles in 1194

INTRODUCTION

The final years of the life of Maimonides were rewarded by the correspondence which he carried on with Provencal Jewry who looked upon him as the divinely appointed instrument for the purification and revival of Judaism. The taste for scientific investigation was nowhere more pronounced than among the Jews of Southern France where Bar Hiyya, Ibn Ezra, the Tibbon and Kimchi families had scattered seeds of Jewish culture. The letters of Maimonides to communities of Marseilles, Lunel, Montpellier — in contrast to his pietistic letters to some Eastern communities such as Baghdad whose severe opposition to his *magnum opus, The Guide to the Perplexed,* prompted him to write the epistle "On the resurrection of the Dead" — reflect more authentically his uncompromising rationalism, and almost natural hostility to benighted obscurantism, blind dogmatism and vulgar superstition. Without any apologetics, he engaged the weight of his mighty intellect and wide erudition against any insights and practices not grounded in the dictates of the intellect. One should never abandon his own intellectual independence, he argued, even at the risk of disagreeing with a contrary opinion of a learned sage which could be demonstrated by scientific proofs to be false. For the latter may have expressed his contrary individual view allegorically or for a specific occasion, which in either case was not meant to be taken literally. Alas, the concluding words of Maiminides, in the following letter to the Jews of Marseilles wherein he states: "One should therefore look ahead of him and not behind him. I have thus revealed to you with these words my whole heart," reflect the authentic thought mode of our philosophers.

At a time when belief in astrology was irresistible and widespread, Maimonides sought to eradicate it root, branch and all. He charged against it with all the force of reason at his command.

In his *Commentary on the Mishnah,* he devotes the eighth chapter of *Shemonah Perakim* to the subject of Providence and Free Will in order "that thou mayest not believe the absurd ideals of the astrologers." In his *Sefer ha-Mada* he branded this universally-held belief of astra determinism as akin to idolatry ("Idolatry II"). In the *Guide* he condemns astrology[1] as "intimately connected with witchcraft . . . leading to the worship of stars" (Part III:37). In the "Epistle to the Jews of Marseilles," he denounces astrology as an irrational illusion of fools and a baseless deception that was subversive to the faith and teachings of Judaism.

Maimonides reached this conclusion after having studied every extant astrological treatise — as a matter of fact, astrology was the first branch of secular learning he pursued — and convinced himself that none of them had any scientific[2] foundation or could be demonstrated by proofs. While astronomy[3] was a science demonstrating the movement of the spheres, the eclipse of the sun and the moon, the subject of astrology was not science at all but an irrational illusion adhered to by simpletons who believe anything or by people who wish to deceive others.[4] No authentic scientist ever devoted time to this enterprise or wrote on the subject of astrology.

By the same token, on the ethical level, he argued that if the fate of man depended on the constellations and everything was preordained then the formulation of the precepts of the Torah was superfluous and observance of the Commandments unnecessary. Moreover, by what justice could God punish the wicked or reward the righteous? Obviously if religion were to have any meaning in helping to shape one's moral being, one's destiny could not be entrusted to the whims of the comets.

The halakhic element in his denunciation of astrology was the most poignant. A belief in this pseudo-science was tantamount to a belief in idolatry. In the face of several utterances by the rabbis who implied a belief in the potency of the stars at a person's nativity, Maimonides declared that "it is forbidden to be an 'observer of times' . . . and whoever is influenced in his actions by astrology and arranges his work or journey to take place at the time fixed by the astrologers, is punished with stripes, as it is said, 'ye shall not observe times' " (Lev. 19:26), (*Hil. Avodat Kochavim,* 11:9). He concludes this chapter with an appeal to his fellow Jews, "endowed as they are with superior intelligence, should not be drawn to such follies nor regard them as advantageous. For is it not written, 'For there is no enchantment with Jacob, neither is there any divination with Israel?' (Num. 23:23). Were we not warned, 'For these nations, that thou art to dispossess, hearken unto soothsayers and unto diviners; but as for thee, the Lord thy God hath not suffered thee so to do?' " (Deut. 18:14).

Apparently Maimonides adhered to the declaration of Rab (*B. Tal. Shab.* 156a), shared by R. Johanan, the Palestinian amora, that "there are no planets for Israel — *ein mazal l'yisrael.*" Rab's contemporary Samuel of Babylon also stated "Torah cannot go together with the art that studies the heavens as we read, 'It (The Torah) is not in heaven.'" (Deut. 30:12; Deut. R. 8:6). On the other hand, statements like that of Raba to the effect that "duration of life, progeny and subsistence are dependent upon the constellations" (*B. Tal. M.K.* 29a), to which he specifically alludes in his letter as well as others must be taken as allegorical.

Moses Maimonides was thus one of the very few outstanding Jewish scholars[6] who resisted the belief in the hypnotic witchery of astrology which was so generally widespread during the middle ages. In communication with authentic intellectuals he dared to articulate an unbending rationalism in halakhah and philosophy which he applied with equal vigor to this pseudo-science.

What follows is my translation of Maimonides' letters to the Jews of Marseilles written in the year 1194.

LEON D. STITSKIN

A Letter of Maimonides to the Jews of Marseilles

Several intimate wise friends of mine in Marseilles, well-versed in Jewish law and legal matters put to me several pertinent questions. May the Almighty protect them and increase their wisdom, magnify and glorify their erudition and vouchsafe His abundant blessings unto all their endeavors. The prayers and heartwarming solicitude of Moses Maimonides for their well-being bears testimony to the purity of their souls and their sincere pursuit of wisdom and understanding in order to rise to a high level of authentic knowledge "and discover acceptable words written in an agreeable script, even words of truth."[7] May the Lord's grace abide with them and help them to disclose the mysterious and straighten out every convexity! Amen.

Your question, although it has many ramifications and subdivisions, may be reduced to one basic issue, namely the problem of the astrologers[8] — the star gazers. Apparently, my work *Mishneh Torah* on the laws of the Torah has not reached you yet; otherwise you would have known my opinion on the questions you posed as I have expounded upon them in the chapter

on Idolatry and pagan statutes. I am certain, however, that my work will reach you before this reply as it has spread already to the Island of Sicily as well as to the East, West and Yemen. Nevertheless, I wish to respond to you directly and elucidate the issues you raised.

Know my masters that no man should believe anything unless attested by one of three principles. First, rational proof as in mathematical sciences; secondly, the perception by one of the five senses; for instance, the judgment or color by one's eyes, taste by the tongue; touch to distinguish between hot and cold; hearing between clear and confused sounds and smell between that which is distasteful or pleasant; and thirdly, tradition derived from the prophets and the righteous. It is accordingly incumbent upon every wise person to investigate his doctrinal beliefs and classify them according to one of the three basic sources which they are drawn from, namely tradition, sensation or rational insights. One, however, who grounds his belief in any other but one of those guiding principles Scriptures refers to him as "the simple believeth every word" (Prov. 14:15).

Moreover, you should know that some misguided people wrote thousands of books on the subject and many ignorant people wasted their precious years pouring over them, mistaking vanity for knowledge and ascribing consummate wisdom to their authors. There seems to be a fatal disease and abysmal mischief among most people, with the exception of a select divinely inspired remnant, to the effect that whatever is found in books is instantly acceptable as truth, especially if the books are ancient. Moreover, if the books are used extensively, the impulsive reader immediately construes them to be works of wisdom for the reason that the pen never belies its author,[9] nor does one engage in the art of writing in vain. However, this kind of involvement in false astrological works whose notions are essentially pagan led to the loss of our kingdom, the destruction of our Holy Temple and extended the duration of the exile to the present day. Our ancestors sinned and disappeared, for as we explained they strayed after false notions, ascribing to them purposeful ends, while neglecting the arts of martial defense and government. No wonder the prophets referred to them as

ignorant and foolish. They were surely correct in this, for they pursued "vain things which cannot profit nor deliver because they are vain" (Samuel 12:21).

Know my masters that I investigated these matters extensively. My early training included knowledge derived from the movement of the stars, such as predictions regarding impending international and national events or the well-being of an individual person. I also read extensively about all pagan practices. There was not a single book translated into Arabic on the subject that I have not studied and investigated in depth. As a matter of fact from these works I derived a rationale for all the *mitzvot,* in contradistinction to those who maintained that *mitzvot* are just dogmatic decrees and have no deeper meaning. I have written a large work on the subject in Arabic expounding upon every *mitzvah* but this is not my intention here. Let me therefore return to the subject you inquired about.

You should realize that all the assumptions of the astrologers with regard to the forecasting of impeding events, or the determination of one's destiny by the constellation at the time of one's birth are irrational superstitions devoid of any scientific basis. I have clear flawless proofs invalidating their essential theories. For one thing we should take note of the fact that none of the Greek thinkers who were surely authentic scientists ever engaged in such notions or wrote any treatises on the subject. They never made the mistake of calling astrology a science as did the Chaldeans, Egyptians and Canaanites who even regarded it as a fundamental doctrine of their religion. The Greek philosophers, who were involved in almost all scholarly disciplines, utterly repudiated these notions, root, branch and all. Also the Persian scholars regarded the astra-deterministic concepts of the Chaldeans, Egyptians and Canaanites as deceptions. It should be pointed out in this connection that the reason we do not believe the proponents of this theory is not simply because their concepts lack sufficient evidence for validation but rather because we possess such clear and flawless proofs to the contrary that their notions are utterly repudiated. It is therefore incumbent upon us not to accept their beliefs which only a simpleton who believes anything or the person who wishes to deceive other

adheres to.

You should know, however, my masters that there is an authentic wisdom concerning the celestial bodies which consists in knowing the form of the spheres, their number, measurement, the course of their movement, the different velocities of their motions, their deflection toward north or south; their revolution eastward and another sphere westward, the orbit of every star and the courses they traverse. These notions and others are contained in large volumes composed by Greek, Persian and Indian scholars and constitute a praiseworthy discipline. By virtue of knowledge derived from this study we can determine the eclipse of the planets, the time of its occurrence in different places, the reason why the moon appears first as a bow gradually increasing until it reaches its full size and then reverts to its original size, as well as the time of its appearance and disappearance. This science further explains to us why one day is longer than another; why two stars appear to rise together but set separately; the reason why the duration of the day time in one place lasts thirteen hours and in another fifteen, sixteen or twenty; or why both day and night are forever equal in one place while in another the day lasts a month, two, three or six months so that the year is equally divided between six daylight months or six sunless months. There are many other related matters we can learn from this wisdom which is without any doubt authentic. This is the science of mathematical astronomy, which our sages confirmed to be the true wisdom in the sight of the people. But the theories of the astrologists are devoid of any value.

Accordingly, I shall presently proceed to expound philosophically upon these secret matters in outline form.[10] You should know that all philosophers who are men of wisdom and science agree that the world has a Ruler who is the Prime Mover and that the sphere is not self-moving. For this they have conclusive evidence and clear proof which no one refutes. Differences among them arise only with reference to the nature of the existence of the sphere and its properties. Many contend that the universe is not transient but eternal. Just like God who is its Prime Mover is eternal so the moved object never exists without the other.[11] Others maintain that the universe is transient and

the Creator brought it into existence out of a primeval stuff co-existent with the Creator like clay in the hand of a potter. Out of a portion of the primeval matter He fashioned the heaven and out of another part the earth, and at another time as a result of His Will, He may mould out of the stuff He originally fashioned the celestial sphere another phenomenon. But *creatio ex-nihilo* they maintain is impossible.

Other philosophers, however, in consonance with our prophets project the theory of *creatio ex-nihilo* and assert that the Creator had no co-existent matter but created all that exists from nothing. The wide differences among philosophers centered on this question as our patriarch Abraham apprehended. Countless books were written containing convincing arguments in support of each theory. The basic principle of our Torah is that the Creator is the First and Last and that there is no one besides Him and that He created all from nothing. One who does not acknowledge this is a heretic and a destroyer of his faith. I have compiled a large work in Arabic on these matters and formulated with valid demonstration and clear proof the existence, authentic unity and incorporeality, in the sense of a physical body or a force in a corporeal body, of the Creator. In addition I have repudiated the contrary claims of the philosophers on the eternity of the universe and resolved the various questions pertaining to our theory of *creatio ex-nihilo.*

Now, the aforementioned three sects of philosophers from ancient times to the present day — those who maintain that co-existent with the Creator was a primeval matter of our prophets who denied eternal matter and stressed God's unity who created the world with His Will out of nothing and finally the eternalists who asserted that the universe was neither created nor transient but existed eternally, moved by the Prime Mover so that the mover and the moved always exist simultaneously — all agree, however, that existence in the sublunar world from living beings, vegetation and minerals, God created through the motion of the spheres and the stars. The spirit of God at first hovered above the spheres and stars and later through them radiated and expanded in this world and brought into being all existence. Just as we maintain that the Almighty performs mir-

acles and wonders through angels, so these philosophers ascribe similar potency to the spheres and stars who are also endowed with life and intellect and are responsible for the existing order of things of nature. The claims of the philosophers are correct and as I have already elucidated with conclusive proof that not only are they not damaging to religious beliefs but as is apparent from the midrashic statements of our sages, there is no dichotomy between them and the philosophers on these matters.

Now, the three sects of philosophers who concurred on the creative faculty of the spheres and the stars, also maintained that casual events befalling individual people are the result of accident and chance and not caused from on high, or from man's nativity or his natural endowment. They see no difference between a human being torn by a lion, and a mouse killed by a cat, or a fly by a spider. Nor do they distinguish between a person fatally struck by a fallen rock and a stone torn off a hill falling upon a tree or another stone and breaking them. Both are the result of chance. By the same token the philosophers hold that bellicose activities carried on by warring people against each other for the sake of enhancement of their respective kingdoms are the result of the constellations as much as a horde of dogs fighting over a dried out carcass. On the other hand, the fate of one's personal fortune reflects in material well being or progeny is left to chance. The general principle they lay down is that events occurring to individual members of the human, animal, mineral or plant species are the result of accident, whereas for the species including inanimate genera, the determination of their fate comes from spheres and stars derived from the Almighty. This is the point of contention. We who follow the authentic teachings of the Torah affirm that events befalling men are the result not of accident, but of God's justice as we read: "He is the Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are just" (Deut. 32:4). The prophet comments: "Thou whose eyes are open over all the ways of the sons of men; to give unto everyone according to his ways and according to the fruits of his deed" (Jer. 32:9). The Torah further admonishes and bears witness to this fact when it states: "But if you will not hearken unto me" I will administer punishment unto you. Should one, how-

ever, maintain that these punishments are not inflicted on account of sins committed, but are simply casual events which occur accidently, we are admonished that the Almighty will keep on increasing similar "events" as we read . . . "But if you will walk contrary unto me then I will also walk contrary unto you . . ." (Lev. 26:21). It is a fundamental doctrine of the Law of Moses, that all events that happen in the world and suffering that befalls collective man are the result of strict judgment. Our sages indicated this when they said: "There is no death without sin nor suffering without iniquity" (*B. Tal. Shabbot,* 55).

You should know further my masters that another fundamental assumption of our faith, concurred by the philosophers, is that man is morally responsible for all of his activities and there is no heteronomous foree to determine his actions. He is free to worship God always and pursue his studies to acquire wisdom or to follow the counsel of the wicked and engage in theft and adultery. And since no natural endowment or the accident of one's birth is responsible for one's pursuits, we were commanded and admonished to act in a certain prescribed way as I have indicated in my Arabic work (*The Guide*) or *the Commentary* on the Mishnah as well as my other works.

Accordingly, we have rational proofs that the vicissitudes that befall man are different from those that occur to animals, as the philosophers maintain. For as we find there are three divergent groups in this regard. First the opinion of the philosophers who argue that if, for instance, Reuben was an impoverished tanner whose children died during his lifetime while Simeon was an affluent pharmacist with children. And then suddenly the wheels of his fortune turned and he suffered reverses and became like Reuben. All this the philosophers maintain was due to pure chance. For no natural force in the world, not the potency of the stars was responsible for the divergent fates of both men.

A second group consists of the astrologers whom you have heard disseminating their irrational folly among you to the effect that it is impossible for anything to undergo a reversal in this world inasmuch as one's fate is sealed by the stars at the time of birth. Hence Reuben was destined to remain forever in his inferior state while Simeon in a more exalted positon.

To be sure both assumptions are false in the light of our true faith. The position of the astrologers has been proved to be groundless by science as well as by theonomy. For if man's life is predestined by an external force that coercively casts him into a frozen mould or impels him to act in a certain way without his own choice, then of what value are the precepts and the teachings of the Torah? It would appear thus that their views are not only invalidated by scientific thought with the same proofs employed by the philosophers against the notions of the Chaldeans and their associates, but in their folly the astrologers tend to reject the Mosaic Law.

By the same token the concepts of the philosophers that everything comes upon us by accident is false in accordance with the dictates of our Torah which we follow scrupulously and rely upon. We affirm that the incidents pertaining to Reuben and Simeon respectively with regard to their financial position and their reverses are not accidental, but a result of the Creator's Will in keeping with strict justice. To be sure we cannot apprehend the ultimate wisdom of the Holy One which would enable us to ascertain by what measure He decrees the fate of each person. For our ways are not His; nor our thoughts His. It behooves us, however, to affirm that if Simeon sins, he will be punished and suffer financial and family deprivation. On the other hand, if Reuben repents and mends his ways he will prosper in all his pursuits, in substance, progeny and duration of life.[12] This is a fundamental principle of the Torah. The fact that many virtuous people do not prosper should not lead one to question our thesis for any misfortune visited upon them may be due either to some iniquities committed by them of which we were not aware or should be construed as a test and a stepping stone to something better in the future. A general principle to hold on to is that our finite mind cannot comprehend. the nature of the Creator's judgment of mankind in this world or the hereafter. With abiding conviction we can only affirm the principle validated by men of science that all the assumptions of the astrologers are false.

I am aware that it is possible to find some individual opinions of our sages in the Talmud, the Mishnah and Midrashim sup-

porting astrological assumptions about the potency of the stars at a man nativity. This should not be disturbing to you inasmuch as we must never abandon practical Halakhah for the sake of upholding dialectical arguments. Moreover, it is not feasible to surrender demonstrative rational knowledge and embrace the opinion of one individual sage who might have missed a crucial point at that time or he may have proffered an allegorical remark not to be taken literally or that his statement was meant as a temporary measure referring to a specific incident. For is it not apparent that many statements of the Torah cannot be taken literally but, as is clear from scientific evidence, require interpretation that will make them acceptable to rational thought? Our eyes are set in the front and not in the back. One should therefore look ahead of him and not behind him. I have thus revealed to you with these words my whole heart.

NOTES

1. Known as a "chaldean science," astrology was considered of celestial origin as having been revealed to mankind by defiant angels (Enoch VIII, 3). In its earliest stages among the nations of antiquity its importance lay in reckoning times and seasons as well as in its supposed power of forecasting the future and controlling the planets. The Assyrio-Babylonian kings received from their astrologers a monthly forecast of coming events and Haman regulated the time for annihilation of the Jews by means of astrological calculations (*Pirke R. El.* 1). In the Roman empire astrology took on an additional aspect. The Roman emperors believed in the allegedly powerful influence of the stars upon the destinies of man and nature. Tiberius was a master in the art of casting a horoscope and regulated all his activities according to his astrological deductions (*Josephus, Antiq.* 18, 6). In all of its aspects astrology was cultivated in Arabic speaking countries, favored by al-kindi and the *Ihwan al-safa.*

Astrology as a cult was introduced into Judea originally through the medium of Hellinism and in the course of centuries it met with an ever widening acceptance. Already Isaiah uses the term *hobre shomayim* (Isaiah 47:13) which the Greek translation renders as astrologers. The Talmud is replete with references to the practice (Comp. *b. T. Shab.* 156a, *Moed Katan* 28a. Of special interest is the comment of Tosafot on *Nid.* 16b and *Meg.* 25a to the effect that astrological predictions are out of the hands of God).

2. It is interesting to note that although many medieval illustrious thinkers like Ibn Gabirol, Abraham ibn Ezra, Yehudah ha-Levi, Abraham ibn Daud and Isaac Abravanel accepted the influence of astrology, it was Abraham Bar Hiyya who did not accord it the rank of a science. (See his Introduction to *Zurat ha Arez* and Friemann's Int. to *Heg. ha-Nefesh.)*

3. Astronomy was called *hokmat ha-hizzayaon* (wisdom of star-seeing) which was practiced as a science in the Middle Ages in distinction to *hokmat ha-nissayon* (wisdom of prognostication).

4. *Shemonah Perakim,* ch. 8 where he states "that our Law agrees with Greek philosophy which substantiates with conclusive proofs that man's conduct is entirely in his own hands."

5. "Every person had a particular star as a guardian spirit with which his fate was closely interwoven" (*Shab.* 146a). Causeless fear in man is a sign that his star sees danger (*Meg.* 3a). God tells Eliezar ben Pedat that his state of poverty is due to having been born in an unlucky hour (*Taanit* 25a).

6. On the other hand, the daring Biblical exegete, Abraham ibn Ezra yielded to this hypnotic lure and became its foremost expounder. He translated astrological works from Arabic and also wrote a treatise on it *Reshit Hokmah,* edited and translated by Raphael Levy and Francisco Contera, *The Beginning of Wisdom* (John Hopkins Press, 1939). See also his commentaries in Gen. 2:9; 2:12, 4:24; 26:34. Ex. 3:15. Lev. 16:8.

7. Ecclesiastes 12:10.

8. *Hobre Shamayim* is found in Isaiah 47:13 and generally translated as astrology.

9. Cf. a similar statement in his *Igereret Teiman* "Regard not all that you see in books as convincing proof. The liar lies with his pen as readily as with his tongue." See also his admonition in *Kiddush-ha-Shem.*

10. Maimonides proceeds to formulate the Aristotelean theory on the basis of its lack of conclusive demonstrative proof which Aristotle himself acknowledged. See *Guide* 11:15.

11. "The Universe is inseparable from God. He is the cause, the Universe, the effect and this effect is a necessary one" (*ibid.* 19).

12. Reference is here to Rabah's statement in *B. Tal. Moed Katan* 28a.